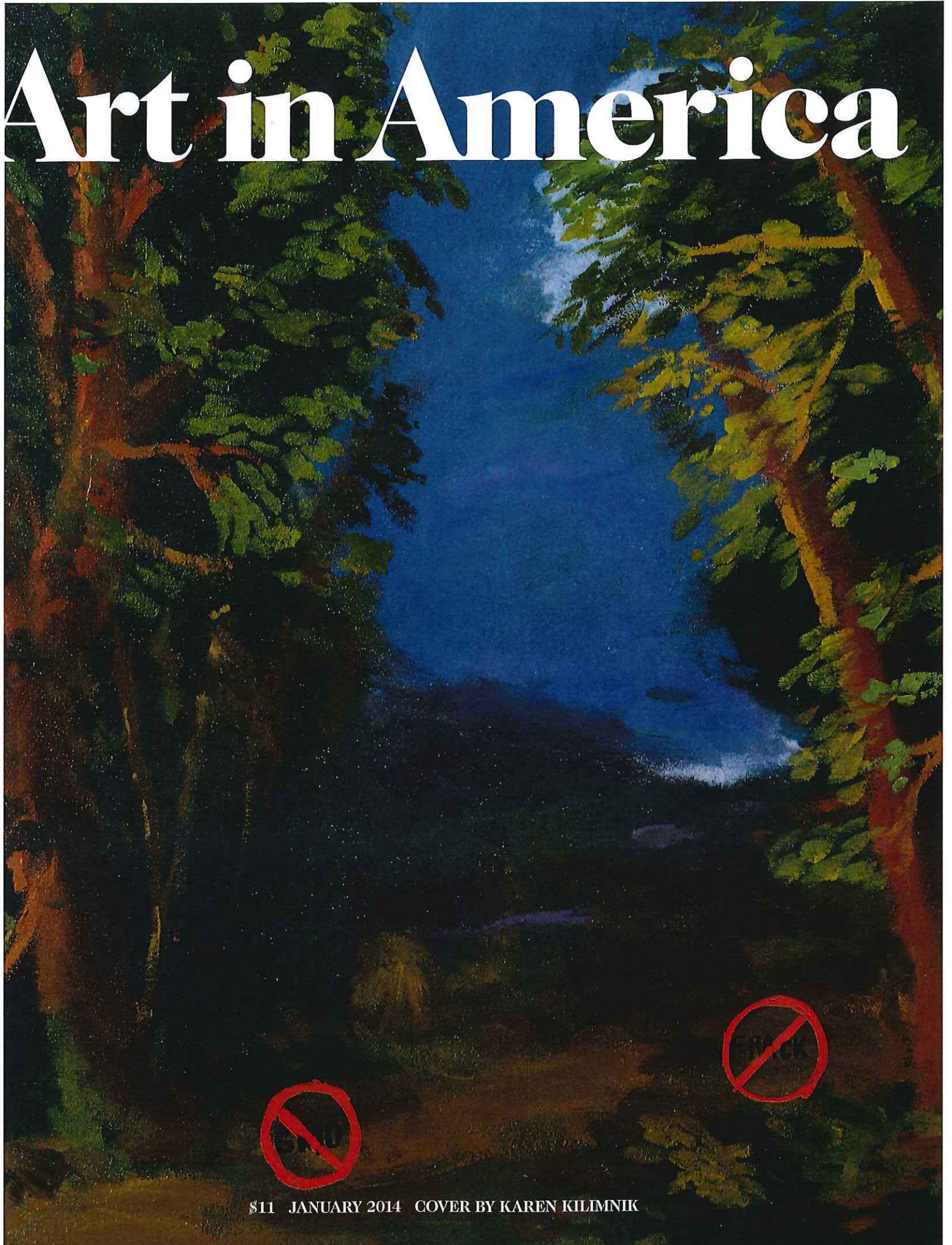


Art in America



\$11 JANUARY 2014 COVER BY KAREN KILIMNIK

Art in America

66 BECOMING KABAKOV

by Margarita Tupitsyn

When he left Russia in 1987, Ilya Kabakov was adept at channeling his dissent into various artistic personae.

Recently, in shows in Moscow and New York, he has manifested a greater candor.

70 BARBED ABSTRACTION

by Catherine Craft

Although known for his fraught metal Lynch Fragments, the young Melvin Edwards presented draping barbed-wire works in his 1970 Whitney Museum solo, the first ever accorded there to an African-American sculptor.

76 THE FUTURIST UNIVERSE

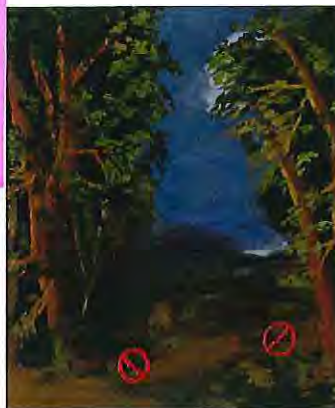
Interview by Kenneth E. Silver

Vivien Greene, curator of the Guggenheim Museum's forthcoming survey of Italian Futurism, talks about expanding public awareness of the myriad participants and artworks of this formally galvanizing, surprisingly long-lived and politically tainted movement.

82 IN THE STUDIO: MING WONG

with Travis Jeppesen

The artist tells how the cultural and linguistic mélange of his native Singapore is reflected in his bold film pastiches, in which he plays all the principal on-screen roles, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social position or age.



Cover: Karen Kilimnik: Left, *the edge of the forest, evening, No GMOS! No Fracking!*, 2012, 24 by 20 inches, and, right, *my nephews in germany by winterhalter, No GMOS! No Fracking!*, 2013, 18 by 14 inches. Both courtesy 303 Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; and Sprüth Magers, Berlin and London. See Contributors page.

Editor's Letter

In this issue, we explore creative approaches to cultural and artistic identity. Ming Wong is among today's most inventive shape-shifters, inserting himself into any and all roles in his video remakes of classic flicks, from Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. Travis Jeppesen visited the 42-year-old artist in his Berlin studio, where, among other matters, the two discussed Wong's roots in



Ming Wong: *Making Chinatown (Part 1: Office)*, 2012, video, 2½ minutes. Courtesy Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou, and carlier | gebauer, Berlin.

Singapore and the effect that city's cinematic mash-up has exerted on his own hybrid sensibility, ever alert to the exclusions of dominant cultures.

Like Wong, sculptor Melvin Edwards has used art as a means to reflect on identity. A black American who came of age during the civil rights struggle, Edwards is best known for his Lynch Fragments, small welded-metal wall sculptures resembling African masks. Catherine Craft, however, focuses her account on the mostly forgotten site-specific barbed-wire sculptures that he exhibited in 1970 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. As the Whitney prepares to present its Biennial and vacate its Marcel Breuer-designed building, it seemed appropriate to revisit Edwards's project, a pioneering effort to infuse abstraction with social content.

Halfway across the world, the Ukrainian-born artist Ilya Kabakov had few opportunities to exhibit his art—at least officially—before leaving the USSR in 1987. His ambitious early installations often focused on the grim nature of communal living. The artist, who spent years knocking around Europe before settling in New York, is the subject of a new documentary by *A.i.A.* contributor Amei Wallach. Though he vowed never to return to Russia, Kabakov has recently mounted some significant exhibitions there. Among them was one in Moscow in which he juxtaposed his own work with that of the Constructivist polymath El Lissitzky. Margarita Tupitsyn, an authority on the Russian avant-garde, considers how Kabakov's artistic identity has undergone a revision as exhibition restrictions have eased in his homeland.

Next month the Guggenheim Museum in New York opens an exhibition aimed at revising our notion of an entire movement. The large-scale survey "Italian Futurism, 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe" examines key aspects of Futurism, which most observers associate with just six or seven main players. Kenneth E. Silver, himself a noted art historian and curator, was surprised by the complexity of the subject when he interviewed the exhibition's curator, Vivien Greene, who adds to the canon a score of artists little known outside Italy, and deepens our understanding of their practice across a range of mediums.

Readers have given us great feedback about the artist projects that graced our covers throughout our 2013 centennial, so we are delighted to announce that we will continue these commissions in 2014. This month Karen Kilimnik has created two designs, one (for newsstand readers) featuring a pair of cherubic blond boys, and another (for subscribers) a pastoral scene. Ostensibly romantic and sentimental, both are "stamped" with hot-button environmental tags that alert us that all is not as it seems.

Lindsay P. Pollock

LINDSAY POLLOCK

JANUARY 2014

Kabakov / Melvin Edwards / Italian Futurism / Ming Wong



MING WONG
Me in Me, 2013, video, approx.
23¾ minutes. Courtesy Vitamin
Creative Space, Guangzhou, and
carlier|gebauer, Berlin.



MELVIN EDWARDS
Avenue B Wire Vari #1, 1973, spray paint and
ink on paper, 22¾ by 35 inches. Courtesy
Alexander Gray Associates, New York.



BARBED ABSTRACTION

The author recounts the social and political significance of a 1970 show of Melvin Edwards's no-longer-extant wire and chain sculptures.

by Catherine Craft

IN MARCH 1970, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York opened an exhibition of site-specific sculptures made of barbed wire and chains by the artist Melvin Edwards (b. 1937).¹ The first show by an African-American sculptor at the museum, Edwards's historic appearance has entered accounts of the period's complex and turbulent racial politics, but the works themselves—preserved only in installation photographs—have received comparably little attention.² The artist David Hammons, visiting from Los Angeles, was one of the few who saw the exhibition, later remarking of the experience: "I was influenced in a way by Mel Edwards's work. He had a show at the Whitney in 1970 where he used a lot of chains and wires. That was the first abstract piece of art that I saw that had cultural value in it for black people. I couldn't believe that piece when I saw it because I didn't think you could make abstract art with a message."³ A reconsideration of Edwards's exhibition reveals its seminal place in art of the period as both an incisive response to the most radical forms of sculpture and installation and as an uncommonly nuanced articulation of social and political issues—qualities that remain vitally relevant to art being made today.

Although Hammons's comments suggest Edwards's installation was a single artwork, the exhibition actually presented four distinct site-specific sculptures, each occupying

a quadrant of the Whitney's ground-floor lobby gallery and possessing individual titles. Across from the doorway was the largest work, *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid*: a triangle and its inverted twin, created from horizontal strands of barbed wire running from floor to ceiling, formed ghostly pyramids on opposite sides of a projecting wall. To the right, descending loops of barbed wire strung from the ceiling in two rows created an unruly cloud and bore the title "*look through minds mirror distance and measure time*"—Jayne Cortez. Across from it, *Curtain for William and Peter* comprised a row of dangling strands of wire joined at the bottom by a chain hanging in graceful catenaries from one strand to the next. To the left of the doorway, rows of barbed wire sealing off a prism of space in the corner was titled *Corner for Ana*.

Edwards had executed initial versions of two of the four sculptures the year before the Whitney exhibition. For "X to the Fourth Power," a group show organized by the painter William T. Williams at the Studio Museum in Harlem, he created *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid*. A longer version of *Curtain for William and Peter* appeared in "5 + 1," an exhibition at the art gallery at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.⁴

The title *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid* mirrored the work's physical composition, and in fact Edwards's maquette for it presented only one side of the piece, the other being generated by simply flipping over the model.

Melvin Edwards:
The Lifted X,
1965, welded
steel, 65 by 45 by
22 inches. Courtesy
Alexander Gray
Associates,
New York.

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Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid (detail), 1970, barbed wire, dimensions variable.

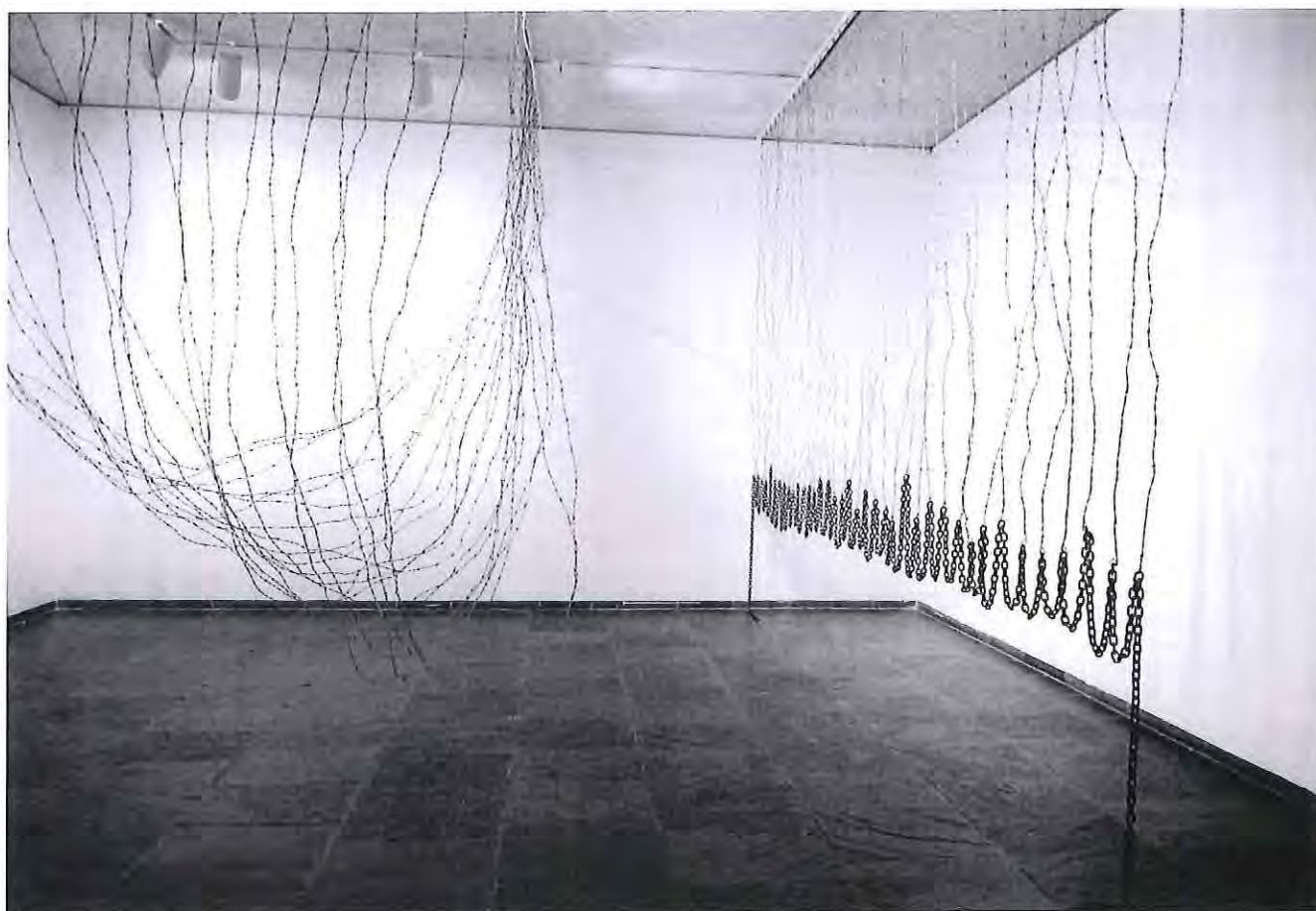


Edwards named *Curtain for William and Peter* for Williams and another painter, Peter Bradley, who shared a studio that Edwards also used for a time. *Curtain*, a barrier at once permeable and forbidding, parodies domestic niceties by offering the division of a communal space of creativity.

The other two, newly created Whitney sculptures responded to aspects of these two earlier works. *Corner for Ana*, named for the artist's eldest daughter, played on the triangular geometry of *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid* as well as a classic childhood punishment. The fourth sculpture, "*look through minds mirror distance and measure time*"—Jayne Cortez, likewise took its cue from *Curtain for William and Peter* by suspending strands of barbed wire. But by attaching the ends of the wire to corresponding points of a right angle on the ceiling, Edwards created an erratically burgeoning form. The work's evocative title comes from a poem in Jayne Cortez's 1969 collection *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares*, for which Edwards provided illustrations. Cortez's fiercely passionate voice animates the poem "Love," from which he drew his title: "the love quilt twine-kissing' in a twist of quivers that love so lassooed / in this loop would look through minds / mirror distance / & measure time."⁵ If Cortez employs a twisting, surging syntax that evokes the ensnaring, dizzyingly seductive embrace of love, Edwards similarly gathers the errant ends of his barbed-wire strands to create a harshly sheltering tunnel of space.

TAKEN TOGETHER, these four sculptures provide a snapshot of artistic concerns at the end of the 1960s. The rigorous conceptual geometry underlying Edwards's configurations of barbed-wire planes and the way he activated the entire space of the Whitney's gallery—ceiling, walls, corners and floor—take Minimalism as a point of departure, while his enlistment of an unconventional material yielding undeniably expressive effects aligns these pieces with those of artists initially associated with the term "anti form," who are today considered Post-Minimalist.⁶ Edwards's Whitney sculptures operate along a continuum of concerns shared with such works as Robert Morris's felts, Eva Hesse's suspended fiberglass and rope works, Fred Sandback's line constructions and Barry Le Va's cleaved walls and floors.

A decided departure from the welded sculptures that had by age 32 garnered Edwards prizes and museum exhibitions on the West Coast, the works in barbed wire nonetheless arose from interests and issues established in those earlier pieces. Although he was likely unfamiliar to many Whitney visitors, between 1963 and 1967—the year he relocated from Los Angeles to New York—Edwards had created a substantial body of mature work, in particular a group of sculptures called Lynch Fragments.⁷ The Lynch Fragments were powerfully compressed wall-mounted configurations melding tools, found objects and scrap metal, their small size belying the intensity of their



Left, "look through minds mirror distance and measure time"—Jayne Cortez, 1970, barbed wire, and right, *Curtain for William and Peter*, 1969, barbed wire and chain.

Photos this spread courtesy Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

components' fusion into a whole. Works from this series had the distinction of being both abstract and uncommonly allusive, connoting the mounting struggle for civil rights through the artist's manipulation of the sculptures' obdurate metal elements.

Robert Doty, the Whitney curator who organized Edwards's exhibition, was familiar with the Lynch Fragments and initially expected Edwards to show such works in his Whitney debut.⁸ But when Edwards decided to move to New York, he also decided to stop making the Lynch Fragments and to pursue other ways of creating art, shifting into works that were at once larger, more conceptually oriented and consciously engaged with the actions and responses of a broader audience. He participated in *Smokehouse*, a cooperative group founded by Williams that made abstract wall paintings outdoors for communities in Harlem,⁹ and began to seek opportunities to make public sculpture, the first of which would be installed at Cornell University in 1968 and then in Harlem the following year. Meanwhile, Edwards's friendship with Cortez, whom he would marry in 1975, intensified his sensitivity to language and its relation to thought, identity and visual art.

Edwards had been using chains in his sculptures since he began making the Lynch Fragments, but his engagement with barbed wire arose from the peripatetic nature of his first years on the East Coast. Teaching at Orange

County Community College in the Hudson Valley, he lived briefly at a large farmhouse in a rural area where barbed wire was common. As with the chains and railroad spikes that had entered the Lynch Fragments, barbed wire presented the artist with a material rich in formal and connotative significance. As he had in the Lynch Fragments, Edwards worked both with and against the cultural associations of his material. The first Lynch Fragment, *Some Bright Morning* (1963), included a small lump of metal dangling from a chain—a direct reference to hanging. Bringing the basic physical principle underlying a horrific act into his art, Edwards began an ongoing meditation on forces of suspension and their relation to the way that masses—whether a configuration of welded steel or a struggling human body—occupy and define space. His explorations quickly led him to make larger sculptures, such as *The Lifted X* (1965) and *August the Squared Fire* (1965), in which forms resembling the Lynch Fragments were set into welded frameworks suggesting a schematic architectural space.

Edwards's statement for the brochure accompanying his Whitney exhibition opens by establishing a link between the first such sculpture he made and the barbed wire works: "My first ideas for connections were formed in about 1963. I was at a place involved in cinematic visual and physical explorations in outer space. I picked



Chaino, 1964,
welded steel and
chains, 62 by
102 by 26 inches.
Courtesy Alexander
Gray Associates.



Machete for Gregory,
1974, welded steel,
barbed wire and
chain, 31 by 40
inches. Courtesy
Alexander Gray
Associates.

my own head for possibilities and came through with a chain, rod and welded steel combination that connected the corner of a room and a ceiling.”¹⁰ Edwards was referring to *Chaino*, a 1964 work displayed in this manner in his solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum in 1965. (Later that year, he added a torqued steel framework to the piece for a group show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.)

INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPHS from Edwards’s Whitney show and a re-creation of *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid* for Art Unlimited at Art Basel 2012 unexpectedly reveal the sculptures’ subtly fluctuating insubstantiality, the result of barbed wire’s spiraled composition from intertwined strands: a certain wavy unruliness is its natural state. This quality animates and subversively undermines the rigid categorical geometry of parallel lines and right angles structuring the sculptures. Moreover, unweathered barbed wire shines and glints, but in the confines of a white-cube gallery space, this reflectivity also brings it close to invisibility—an illusion quickly countered by tactile contact.

Containment and openness are consistent themes in Edwards’s art, and they are likewise central to barbed wire’s nature and use. Noting that the material had a long history in war and agriculture, he observed: “Wire like most linear materials has a history both as obstacle and enclosure but barbwire has the added capacity of painfully dynamic and aggressive resistance if contacted unintelligently.” Edwards spoke from experience—he grew up in Houston, where barbed wire was ubiquitous, and, as a boy, he was sometimes teased by his cousins when he “tried to cross the fence and got stuck.”¹¹ Edwards knew what it was like not only to confront a barrier of barbed wire but to manipulate, negotiate and travel along and through it.

Barbed wire is an especially apt material for an artist interested in the relation between drawing and sculpture, line and space: barbed wire is of course linear, but it is also already subtly sculptural, projecting into space at regular intervals. The material specificities of barbed wire encouraged Edwards to pursue issues he had begun to explore in the suspended welded pieces, but on an environmental scale. His curtains, corners, pyramids and “twists of quivers” contain areas that must be approached at some physical risk, but their nearly invisible containment paradoxically signaled the artist’s freedom. Edwards concluded his Whitney statement with a pointed conjunction of limits and liberty:

I am now assuming that there are no limits and even if there are I can give no guarantees that they will contain my spirit and its search for a way to modify the spaces and predicaments in which I find myself.

The complexities of Edwards’s use of barbed wire were lost on many viewers, the provocative character of the artist’s materials overshadowing his uniquely powerful and distinc-

tively personal engagement with them.¹² After the Whitney show, his creation of environmental barbed wire sculptures dropped off. Eventually, the wire from the four Whitney sculptures was repurposed in smaller sculptures and in drawings, where he sprayed paint over fragments of the material. As the artist gained more opportunities to create public sculpture and returned to the Lynch Fragments later in the 1970s, these works reveal the impact of his intensive involvement with barbed wire: most notably, in the artist’s greater willingness to release and open up the enormous compression of his early sculptures and to create more expansive works that at times verge on architectural space. “Walking through a doorway is a sculptural act,” the artist recently commented.¹³ Working for a brief but intense period with the linear and sculptural resistance of barbed wire created new ways to bring this conviction into his art. ○

This article is part of a longer essay that will be published in the exhibition catalogue *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*, organized by the author for the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, and opening in 2015. Many thanks to Melvin Edwards and Alexander Gray Associates, and to Lewis Kachur, who helpfully commented on an early version.

1. “Melvin Edwards: Works” was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 3–29, 1970. A brochure containing statements by Edwards and artist William T. Williams accompanied the exhibition.
2. Edwards was selected for the second in a series of solo exhibitions the Whitney dedicated to emerging African-American artists, part of the institution’s attempt to remedy its abysmal representation of African-American artists in its collection and exhibitions over the previous four decades. The series, running erratically from 1969 to 1974, included Alvin Loving, Edwards, Fred Eversley, Marvin Harden, Malcolm Bailey, Frank Bowling, Alma W. Thomas, Jack Whitten, Betye Saar and Minnie Evans. For an account of these exhibitions and the Whitney’s relations with the African-American community during this period, see Kellie Jones, “It’s Not Enough to Say ‘Black is Beautiful’: Abstraction at the Whitney 1969–1974” (2006), in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 397–426.
3. Kellie Jones, “Interview with David Hammons (1986),” in *EyeMinded*, p. 249.
4. “X to the Fourth Power” was shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem, June 1–13, 1969, and in addition to Edwards and Williams included Sam Gilliam and Steven Kelsey. “5 + 1,” on view Oct. 16–Nov. 8, 1969, was organized by Frank Bowling and included Bowling, Edwards, Williams, Loving, Whitten and Daniel Johnson. According to a review of the exhibition, Edwards’s curtain was 40 feet long and divided the gallery lengthwise. Janet Bloom, “5 + 1,” *Arts* 44, December 1969–January 1970, p. 56.
5. Jayne Cortez, *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares*, New York: Phrase Text, 1969, n.p.
6. See Robert Morris, “Anti Form,” *Artforum* 6, April 1968, pp. 33–35. Robert Pincus-Witten coined the term “Post-Minimalism” in his article “Eva Hesse: Post-Minimalism into Sublime,” *Artforum* 10, November 1971, pp. 35–40.
7. Sculptures from Edwards’s years in Los Angeles were a highlight of the initiative Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980, particularly in the Hammer Museum’s exhibition “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980,” Oct. 2, 2011–Jan. 8, 2012, curated by Kellie Jones.
8. Doty had seen Edwards’s work on the West Coast. Interview with the artist, June 11, 2013.
9. In addition to Williams and Edwards, Smokehouse included Guy Ciarcia and Billy Rose; the artists worked in Harlem between 1968 and 1970, mainly during summers. Michael Oren, “The Smokehouse Painters, 1968–1970,” *Black American Literature Forum* 24, Autumn 1990, pp. 509–31.
10. Artist’s statement, *Melvin Edwards: Works*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970, n.p. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Edwards in the paragraphs that follow also come from this brochure.
11. “Melvin Edwards in Conversation with Manthia Diawara and Lydie Diakhaté,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30, Spring 2012, p. 128.
12. The reception of Edwards’s Whitney show will be explored by the author in a forthcoming, longer essay.
13. Interview with the artist, May 3, 2013.